

MSHDA OFFICE OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

VISITABILITY STANDARDS FOR OCD FUNDED NEW CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS
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Background: While not specifically included in any standard building code, the term visitability is taking on increased meaning within the housing industry in general and affordable housing in particular. Though some variation in definitions exist, most references to visitability relate to building new single family homes in a manner that individuals with mobility limitations can reasonably visit the occupants. At a minimum, this requires the main floor of a home to have a zero-step main floor entry, doors wide enough to maneuver through in a wheelchair, and a half-bathroom.

Over the past few years, MSHDA staff has met with various advocacy groups about the issue of “visitability” in the construction of new homes funded by the Office of Community Development (OCD). During the same period two different versions of a bill requiring some level of visitability were considered by the legislature including the Inclusive Home Design Act which was passed and signed by the governor. On a national level, HUD has included scoring preferences within its SuperNOFA for projects promoting visitability, and many other state and local recipients of HUD funding have incorporated visitability standards into their program requirements.

OCD believes that properly and thoughtfully incorporating visitability features can improve the quality, marketability, and livability of homes produced with its assistance. Such homes will serve the needs of more families both now and in the future as such features make homes more easily adaptable if a resident develops greater accessibility needs.

Visitability Policy: From this context, OCD is implementing the following requirements:

1. **All** new construction single-family homes developed with assistance by OCD must meet the visitability standards in Item 3 below unless a specific waiver is granted. Single-family homes will include one, two, and three unit structures, but the standards will not apply to the second story unit in an over/under duplex.
2. If granted, **waivers will be limited**, waiving only the specific requirements that OCD determines cannot be reasonably met. For example, a project receiving a waiver of the requirement for a zero-step entry would still be required to include grab bar blocking, a large enough half bath for a wheelchair, wider doorways and halls, and appropriately placed environmental controls.
3. OCD will define “visitability” as **requiring the following standards:**
 - a. A no-step main floor entry with a threshold of less than ½ inch must be provided (this entry may be in the front, back, side, or through the garage);
 - b. All doorways on the main floor must be at least 32 inches wide with the door open at a 90 degree angle (note that achieving this amount of clearance will generally require at least 34 inch interior doors on the entry level);

- c. All hallways on the main floor must be at least 36 inches wide (note that 34 inch doors at the end of a hallway will generally require that the hallway be at least 40 inches wide to allow for door casings);
- d. All main floor bathrooms must include blocking for future grab bar installation which is no less than 33 inches and no more than 36 inches above the floor (however, this policy does not require that grab bars be installed at the time of construction);
- e. Every unit must be provided with at least one half-bathroom on the main floor with i) a clear floor space of 30 by 48 inches centered on and contiguous to the sink that is not encroached by the swing path of the bathroom door and ii) a sink and toilet that allow for parallel or head-on approach by a person in a wheelchair; and
- f. Main floor environmental controls—including light switches and heating and cooling controls—must be located at least 15 inches and no more than 48 inches above the floor.

Documentation of Compliance: Grantees must complete the attached “Visitability Certification” for every new single-family home developed with OCD assistance. Additionally, grantees are also expected to use the “Visitability Contract Rider” in all general construction contracts for new single-family homes.

Technical Assistance and Ongoing Implementation: In addition to making new homes visitable, OCD and its grantees strive to produce energy efficient units that are compatible with the neighborhood and cost effective. To this end, MSHDA has contracted with an architectural firm to provide three to six home designs to assist us in meeting our goals.

The plans will be value engineered to meet requirements pertaining to visitability and energy efficiency which should improve the overall quality and value of the homes produced by OCD grantees. Using a variety of floor plans and elevation options we are hopeful that OCD grantees will find something suitable for the neighborhoods they are working in. OCD expects the designs to be available in the fall or winter of 2007/2008. The designs will be offered at no cost to OCD grantees, however, grantees are not required to use them.

Grantees who have specific plans already in use may request technical assistance to modify those plans and specifications to meet OCD's requirements. (**Note:** Technical Assistance paid for by OCD is subject to the availability of funds.)

Associated Documents: Documents needed by grantees to show compliance with this policy include:

- 1. Visitability Certification—to be completed by the Grantee's project/construction manager;
- 2. Visitability Rider—to be signed by the General Contractor and incorporated into the construction contract; and
- 3. Visitability Waiver Request—to be completed as needed by the Grantee's project/construction manager.